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“DON’T ASK ME; ASK THEM!”:
EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO LEAD THEIR OWN LEARNING (AND EACH OTHER)

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this teacher inquiry is to observe the dynamics of a secondary, advanced level English classroom when strategies are implemented to encourage student-led learning. Such research is relevant as high school administrators, policymakers, and teachers increasingly value student-centered models for teaching and learning, yet much of the research on student-led teaching methods is conducted on college campuses. In contrast, this inquiry is based in a non-traditional, democratic school setting that prioritizes student voice and leadership beyond the classroom.

In pursuit of a student-led classroom, I challenged students to read an unmediated text, lead their peers in student-moderated discussion, create assessment materials on their readings, and design and defend a multimodal final project of their choosing. I hypothesized that these classroom activities would facilitate the creation of a more democratic classroom, amplifying student voice and encouraging authentic participation. I discovered that taking a student-led approach largely accomplished these goals, and students reported seeing value beyond my original goals.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Don’t Ask Me; Ask Them!”

If there was one instance I could cite as my inspiration for this study, it would be what could have been the worst day of my student teaching experience. Luckily, it turned into my best, and through it, I realized the capability and creativity of the students featured in this inquiry. While it feels risky to eternalize this experience in writing – for I must admit fault and lack of preparation in doing so – it speaks to the power of reflecting in action and trusting in one’s students, even if doing so is the only option available.

The experience to which I am referring is a day in the fall of 2017 in which both of my mentor teachers were attending the National Council for the Teaching of English (NCTE) Conference in St. Louis, Missouri. My mentor with whom I co-taught Advanced English Seminar left me with plans to lead our class in discussion about the day’s assigned reading from William Faulkner’s *Light in August*. I had prepared passages to reference, essential questions to ask, and was very much looking forward to leading the class on my own for the first time. In my preparation period about twenty minutes before the start of class, I was grading reflections the students had written on past reading assignments. As I started my second-to-last reflection to grade, I saw the student had chosen to write about the portion of the reading that we were to discuss that day. Thinking this was odd, I flipped to the next reflection and saw the same chapters in the introduction. An awful feeling washed over me, and I checked our bookmark of

assigned readings. Because I had been absent the class before, *I had prepared extensively for the discussion I missed instead of the one for that day*: my first day of teaching alone, and I hadn't done my reading!

Worst-case scenarios flashed through my mind, and I sent a panicked email to my mentor, despite knowing that he would be engaged in a seminar in Missouri, far from the ability to help. I quickly found a summary of that day's reading and skimmed the chapter for notable moments, preparing for our class in a way that an unprepared student might. Ours was always engaged in a text-based discussion, and my mentor had a knack for pulling themes and motifs together from throughout the book. I had fifteen minutes until class, and the way I spent those minutes would matter. My brain told me to read and reflect as much as I could in that time, but my gut said otherwise. How could I let these students, already capable of discussing at a higher-level, essentially run the class for themselves? What structures could I provide to support them that did not rely so heavily on my own knowledge?

As students filed into class, I had a plan, but I still wrung my hands. Students, per usual, were discussing the book as they arrived, and I could do nothing but smile when they directed the conversation in my direction. To start class, I went to the center of the room, surrounded by students on all sides.

"Guys, I have a confession to make." I saw eyes lift from papers and books close.

"I know it's hard to believe, but I'm human" – at this, students let out a respectful laugh – "and I didn't do the proper reading for today. I'm sorry, and I fully admit it. I know we've been understanding when some of you are unprepared for class, and I ask you do the same for me. Again, I'm sorry." Some of the students let out sympathetic sounds, but they waited for further instructions.

“With that being said, I see this as an excellent opportunity for you to teach me about today’s reading. I cannot answer any of your plot-based questions, but I want to know what I’ve missed. I’m passing out a notecard to each of you, and on one side, I would like you to choose a passage or image created by the author that you think, if nothing else, I should know from this reading. Then, write your explanation on the other side. I’m hoping you can piece together the chapter for me, and we can discuss when I see you’ve finished. Before we get started with that, does anyone have any clarifying questions about the chapter?”

A student raised her hand, and, looking directly at me, asked about one of the character’s actions.

“Don’t ask me; ask them!” I said with a playfully teasing tone, nodding at her classmates. She readjusted in her seat and turned to the class. A few other questions were posed, and I avoided eye contact with students, encouraging them to dialogue with one another. I found that without having prior knowledge of the reading, I was able to ask more authentic follow-up questions, and students were more deliberate in how they explained their answers to one another. Rather than assuming everyone understood the scenes to which they were referring, they were sure to provide context for me, and perhaps, others who had not read the reading as thoroughly as they had. I watched with joy as the class taught me, the teacher, what they felt I should know. Could the situation be any more authentic?

As usual, our discussion took most of our seventy-minute class period, but it never ran dry. Students were engaged in dialogue with one another, punctuated only by my reminders to address questions to their classmates and not to me. After class, as I collected the notecards, a student approached me with an empathetic tone.

“You handled that really well, Hannah. That was really fun.”

“Yeah, I’d be so nervous,” her friend added. “But stuff like that happens.”

I looked down at my stack of notecards: artifacts from students who wanted to catch me up on the reading with the same eagerness as a friend sharing a missed episode of a TV show. I was amazed by the depth of explanations I found as students genuinely tried to fill in gaps they perceived in my understanding. But mostly, I was impressed by how maturely they handled the situation and how seriously they acknowledged my humanity.

In a class that once relied so heavily on a teacher’s voice, I sensed an opportunity. These students liked demonstrating what they know, but even more so when they presented the knowledge as their own. On a day that could have been a disaster, long-developing elements of my teaching philosophy and inquiry became clear, and the write-up of this inquiry gave me the opportunity to unpack that. Student voice would become the center of the unit I am about to share, but this experience helped me realize that it was there all along.

Context of Study

This unit was implemented in a mixed-grade English course for high achieving students with at least two credits of English. The course is listed in the school’s catalog as “Advanced English Seminar,” and it meets every other day for seventy minutes.

Of the nineteen students in Advanced English Seminar, fifteen are female, three are male, and one student identifies as transgender. There are three students in Grade 10, seven students in Grade 11, and nine students in Grade 12. Two students have 504 plans, and one has an Individualized Education Plan.

One of the keys to understanding this inquiry is its context. Advanced English Seminar (also referred to as “AES”) is offered exclusively to students in “Delta,” a democratic school of choice within a large, suburban school district in central Pennsylvania. The district encompasses a university town and its surrounding areas, and many students’ parents are employed in some capacity at the local university. As such, many students have unique opportunities to travel and interact with scholars on a personal basis; many parents publish their own research and participate meaningfully in their child’s education through the school’s Parent-Teacher-Student Organization, or PTSO. Parents are invited to share their subject knowledge with Delta students as guest speakers or consultants for school activities.

Delta is located in a separate building from the traditional high school, but some students choose to take classes at both locations. All Delta students sign a contract outlining their behavioral and academic expectations before joining the school, and their placement at the school can be revoked due to violations of that contract. Among the high expectations of the program, there are also some privileges unique to the school, including an open-campus policy and the ability to complete credits through independent study. While Delta is under the umbrella of the district’s Educational Alternatives department, it is not a program designed to address the needs of students with significant behavioral, academic, or emotional classifications.

As a democratic school of choice, Delta has certain procedures and structures dedicated to student voice. Each day, there is a thirty-minute period called “Democracy in Action” in which students meet in interest-related committees, discuss school happenings in “clumps” with an advisor, engage in community building, participate in an All-School Meeting (ASM), or meet one-on-one with teachers in “Teacher Time.” These periods are largely student-led, and the ASM is entirely moderated by students. Anyone can contribute to the ASM agenda, and anyone can

volunteer as moderator. Faculty members sit as participants amongst students in the auditorium, and the meeting is conducted in a large circle around the student moderators. As an additional measure to ensure equality of voices in the school, teachers and administrators are addressed by their first names at all times. For instance, in this inquiry, one may see that I am called “Hannah” by my students.

Background & Statement of Inquiry

Because of Delta’s focus and specific structures geared towards student voice and ownership of learning, I expected classes at Delta to be largely student-centered. Many elements of my mentor’s class were; however, I made the following observations over the course of nine weeks:

1. Most discussions were teacher-centered and exclusive to many students in the class. My mentor teacher led discussion and students responded primarily to him, and while discussions were productive, two students’ voices were consistently dominant.
2. Students who did participate often spoke to themes or lenses of reading literature that were favored by the mentor teacher. For instance, my mentor teacher teaches a “Bible as Literature” course in another semester, so he often made detailed biblical connections in our discussions. Many students made biblical connections, too, but their interpretations felt more superficial than his. It appeared that they did not have the background knowledge he had to make such claims, but nevertheless, they voiced them. (I acknowledge that I cannot assume students’

prior knowledge. Some did take his “Bible” course before, and others may have funds of knowledge from their personal/family faith systems. This mimicry is merely one example of a trend I wished to interrogate).

In order to address my concerns about our teacher-centered classroom dynamics, I designed a teacher-inquiry project with the following guiding questions:

- What happens when students are empowered to lead their own learning in an advanced, secondary English classroom?
- How can an unmediated text, student-led discussion, and multimodal assessment encourage student voice and strengthen authentic participation?

Instructional Methods

Text Selection: The Tsar of Love and Techno as an Unmediated Text

At Delta, individual teachers are given a great deal of autonomy and authority over curricular decisions, and a standard, shared curriculum is not followed from year to year. Teachers are given the flexibility to respond to needs and requests of students when planning courses for future semesters, and responsive teaching decisions are supported by administration and the very culture of the school. It is still expected that standards from the Pennsylvania Department of Education are met, as Delta students are still in the public school system and must participate in state standardized testing. As such, PDE standards were consulted and incorporated throughout the planning of the unit for this inquiry (See Appendix A).

Because of Delta’s flexible curriculum, I was able to select a text I wished to use in this inquiry. In previous units in Advanced English Seminar, students read canonized texts such as

Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, William Faulkner's *Light in August*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. They enjoyed these texts and discussed them with great enthusiasm, but I was curious to see how they would respond to a contemporary novel written by a living author. I noticed that in *Light in August* in particular, students praised Faulkner's triptych-like narrative structure and relished in uncovering the ambiguous connections between characters. I was reminded, then, of a novel I read in college: *The Tsar of Love and Techno* by Anthony Marra. Published in 2013 and presented as a collection of connected short stories, it has a similar style of plot and character development to *Light in August*; the rich, witty language of *The Great Gatsby*; and the grim, sympathetic characters of *Jude the Obscure*. It would be the last full-class read of the semester, and it appeared to be an appropriate capstone for the most-loved elements of "classic" stories we had read together.

The Tsar of Love and Techno is set throughout the era of post-Revolution Russia, including modern day. Some content is rather mature for students in high school, but I suggested it to my mentor with this caution and was supported in teaching it. In the spirit of our democratic school, we also announced our tentative plan to students in the class and shared our concerns about various scenes. One student remarked: "Come on, I feel like if we can read *Light in August*... we can read this!" The class laughed in agreement – having just discussed a controversial part of that text – and we elected to go forward with my proposal.

I was both intrigued and intimidated by the prospect of teaching a text that had few, if any, resources for teachers online. In the planning stages of my unit, I only discovered basic discussion guides for the book, and these were provided not by teachers or professors, but by community reading forums and library websites. Therefore, I was forced to rely on my own interpretations and expertise as I prepared to teach it, just as the students, too, would need to rely

entirely on their own thoughts and perceptions during class discussions. While our other texts were accessible on SparkNotes or Shmoop – websites students admit to referencing for essays and classwork, which was certainly permissible – this text was too new (and too under-studied) for there to be many other voices to consult. As far as I could tell, we were the first high school English class to ever deconstruct this story, and we would be working through it, authentically, together!

A goal of this inquiry was to remove myself from the role of “teacher as expert” in the class, so why not teach a text on which no one proclaims to be one?

Student-Led Discussion: The Discussion Leader Guide & Teacher’s Role

In order to most directly address the issue of teacher-centered and exclusive discussions in Advanced English Seminar, I decided to change the format of discussion. Before this unit, students faced one another in a large, rectangular formation, but my mentor and I sat at the “front” of this rectangle in front of the chalkboard. Discussions rarely began with a focused question at the start, for rather than waiting for a formal invitation to speak, students regularly walked into class with comments, reactions, and questions for clarification. Class would often begin with an organic side conversation that eventually engaged most of the class before the bell.

However, as class got underway, the discussion would become more and more exclusive. “Class” discussions became a few students addressing my mentor with a question or comment, my mentor responding to that question or comment, and then another student – or the same one – posing a follow-up or additional point. As class progressed and students gradually stopped volunteering, my mentor and I would draw students’ attention to passages we had underlined in

our individual readings of the text. Occasionally a student would bring his or her own passage to present to the class, whether for clarification or for further discussion, but I noticed the distribution of voices in the class was disparate. The students who did speak demonstrated higher-level thinking, but some students seemed to be silenced by their peers, and even, by my mentor and me. In one class discussion, I tracked participation, and the distribution was disturbingly skewed towards my mentor and two particularly talkative students (this data shall be presented in ‘Data Analysis’).

I found it difficult to reconcile these dynamics with the philosophy of our democratic school. After discussing my concern with my mentor, he suggested that this model of discussion was indeed democratic because students were not compelled to speak at any given time – the choice was entirely theirs. However, I wondered, could the very structure of class discussion be a hindrance to students’ willingness to contribute? Did the students take issue with this distribution of voices, as I did? His suggestion presented a challenge: to create an atmosphere that allows students to contribute authentically and at-will, but also, one that encourages all to do so.

To ensure that each person had a voice in the unit, I planned for discussions to be entirely student-led. Each day of class, a different set of students known as “Discussion Leaders” were charged with preparing three open-ended discussion questions, a significant passage, and five short-answer quiz questions to engage our class, and they would respond to their own questions in writing. They organized their preparations around the “Discussion Leader Guide” (see Appendix B) and submitted this document to me for evaluation after their discussion. They were encouraged to use these guides as they led the class.

Naturally, I had to adjust my “teacher role” in order to support this new structure. My mentor teacher and I gave our seats to the discussion leaders, and we took theirs in the larger

circle of the class. My mentor and I committed to interfering as little as possible in the content of the discussion, and we told students we would only step in when there was a logistical need, such as ending discussion in time for the end of class or administering the quiz. I consciously avoided eye contact with students, which I hoped would be a subtle enough gesture to encourage them to address their peers rather than the teacher: a tactic I learned from that fateful day during *Light in August*.

Student-Generated Assessments

Because I was teaching this unit as a half-year intern in a full-year class, I wanted to respect the existing norms and procedures of Advanced English Seminar whilst still experimenting with activities to meet the goals of my inquiry. Therefore, I decided to maintain the norms of having daily reading quizzes and a certain number of written reflections during a novel unit, per the procedure of my mentor teacher. However, I adapted these structures to support the goals of my inquiry by:

1. **Making quizzes student-generated.** As part of preparation for their day of leading discussion, student discussion leaders created and submitted five short-answer quiz questions to be considered for the daily reading quiz. At quiz time, I chose ten questions to ask from the list submitted, and students were permitted to write an additional “Ask and Answer” question of their own to replace any of the ten given questions they had missed. The “Ask and Answer” procedure is one that students seem to appreciate having, and it, too, is a norm in Advanced English Seminar.

2. **Scaffolding written reflections with open-ended and thought-provoking essential questions.** By the end of each unit in Advanced English Seminar, students were required to write a two-page reflection on at least two assigned sections of readings. Students had the freedom to choose which two sections of reading they analyzed, but in previous units, some students struggled to create a solid thesis for these reflections when the prompt was left entirely open-ended. Therefore, in this unit, I suggested a list of “essential questions” to which they could respond, but I preserved the student choice norm by not requiring they use them. These questions were presented to students on a bookmark (along with our reading schedule) in the hopes that they would consider them throughout their reading, if not in written form. The essential questions posed were higher-order in nature, and they pointed to overall themes of the novel and its context. They were:
- a. How does individualism conflict with the norms of a collective society?
 - b. How do our families’ stories and traditions shape who we are?
 - c. How can self-expression survive in an oppressive situation?
 - d. What role do the arts play in self-expression?
 - e. How can the arts be a tool for revolution or resistance?
 - f. Is it possible to rewrite history? (Historically, what methods have governments and individuals used to do so?)
 - g. How does Russian culture differ from American culture? (How might conflicts arise between them?)
 - h. How far should/could one go to defend the truth? (When is it better to lie?)
3. **Providing opportunities for student creativity and expression through a multimodal, student-generated final project.** None of the previous units in Advanced English

Seminar had a final assessment. However, I predicted that students would have deep personal connections to themes in this novel that we would all benefit from them sharing. Because many forms of art are significant to the interpretation of the novel itself, including music, dance, the visual arts, and more – and because students in this class expressed interests and hobbies in those areas before this unit – I decided to design a creative final assessment that could incorporate those elements. To provide students with room to share their connections – and exercise creativity outside of writing alone – I asked them to “express a theme or personal connection to this novel through a non-written medium of [their] choice.” Along with the creation of a non-written artifact, students were also instructed to write an apologia explaining why they chose the medium they did and what their work was meant to represent in relation to the novel. To ensure feasibility and an appropriate level of rigor, my mentor and I required students to share informal project proposals with us before they could proceed to the creation stage. No students’ proposals were denied, but one student changed her project before the due date with our permission.

Preserving the Full-Class Read

Finally, I chose to maintain the norm of the full-class read despite my focus on student voice and choice in this unit. While one might expect me to implement a choice reading, I saw something beautiful in the way my students commiserated, agreed, argued, and bonded in discussions of literature even before we implemented the student-led discussion. To hear students coming down the hall to class already engaged in conversation about a book made me

feel like I was fulfilling my purpose in teaching literature. After all, a great deal of my teaching platform, and my reasoning for teaching and discussing literature at all, is based on the concept of fostering community in the classroom but also empathy for those outside of it. Students having a shared experience around a text allowed for those values to come to life, as they were able to see that others might read the same text but find an entirely different meaning from their own interpretations. We all live in the same world and may even perceive the same things at the same time, but, as constructivism tells us, the influence of prior experiences and later collaboration with others can forge new viewpoints and attitudes.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Constructivism & The Student-Centered Classroom

As I planned this unit, I had to consider tenets of constructivism and student-centered classrooms in order to be successful. Constructivism is a theory of learning that can inform teaching practices, and it is the framework in which this inquiry is grounded. Based on the work of psychologists Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, constructivism holds that “as learners we construct our own understanding of the world around us based on experience as we live and grow... select[ing] and transform[ing] information from past and current knowledge and experience into new personal knowledge and understanding” (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010, p. 8). It appreciates different perspectives to the point of questioning reality, for constructivists believe that “each individual will construct their own reality which will not necessarily coincide with the reality of others” (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010, p. 7). Because it considers that “reality is not something which can already exist in the form arrived at by one individual” (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010, p. 7), constructivism “casts doubt on some of the many other ‘truths’ we often accept without reflection” (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. 61).

Constructivists consider the evidence of learning to be varied and ambiguous at times. Unlike behaviorism, a learning theory that values “observable, measurable behavior” as an indicator of learning, constructivism attempts to account more for “rarely observable mental processes... [like] dreams, daydreams, mental images, emotions, values, beliefs, learning styles,

and processes of thinking and reasoning” (Gagnon & Collay, 2010, p. xv). Indeed, constructivism “focuses on in-depth understanding, not regurgitating and repeating back” (Marlowe & Page, 2005, p. 11). Because of the nature of questions explored in an English-Language Arts classroom, a constructivist approach might focus more of the process of learning than the products.

Therefore, in a constructivist classroom, the teacher “seeks to provide an environmentally rich, problem-solving context that encourages the learner’s investigation, invention, insight, and inference,” for it is believed that “learning does not occur when the learner passively receives information” (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010, p. 47). Direct instruction is discouraged, for “there is very little role for student activity” and “it does not permit students to redefine or build new meanings for the objects with which they come into contact” (Shapiro, 2003, p. 340). Instead, the teacher “values and necessitates students taking ownership of their own learning” (Gagnon & Collay, 2001, p. xiii), and she would also plan activities that allow for “learner reflection, cognitive conflict, and peer interaction” (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010, p. 48). In an English Language Arts classroom, the teacher’s role would be “helping students or groups of students to clarify for themselves the nature of their own questions, to pose their questions in terms they can pursue, and to interpret the results in light of other knowledge they have generated” (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. 30). As Gagnon & Collay (2001) warn, this can be challenging, for “making the transition from ‘expecting listening’ to ‘supporting learning’ demands that teachers examine their practice and reframe their teaching” (p. xvi). Indeed, constructivism pursues “ultimate decentralization, with student and teacher able to make decisions regarding what and how they learn” (Shapiro, 2003, p. 354). These perspectives form the foundation of this inquiry project, and, I would later find, my own teaching platform.

Of course, creating a constructivist classroom can feel somewhat unconventional and daring, for constructivist teaching requires “rejection of the traditional teacher-dominated classroom in which the teacher manages, controls, and dispenses information” (Marlowe & Page, 2005, p. 13). Constructivist teachers “see [traditional] education not only as passive and controlling, but also dysfunctional in relation to individual, democratic, and societal needs,” and “they see it as stifling students’ creativity, autonomy, independent thinking, competence, confidence, and self-esteem and as making students dependent, conforming, and non-thinking” (Marlowe & Page, 2005, p. 13). At the same time, “structured administrators – as many administrators tend to be – often find constructivist teaching ‘messy,’ making them uncomfortable” (Shapiro, 2003, p. 358). Also, in particular relevance to this study, Marlow & Page (2005) found that “pre-service student teachers who try to implement constructivist models in the classroom... often make the unfounded leap from traditional formats to total student and classroom freedom, which almost always spells chaos – and little learning – in the classroom” (p. 31). However, there are many benefits to the constructivist practice if a teacher feels capable of embracing it in a practical manner.

Of course, pursuing a constructivist classroom and “providing opportunities for students to generate their own curriculum requires risk and courage. But, the risk is worth it as this process also generates a great deal of motivation” (Shapiro, 2003, p. 351). According to Brooks & Brooks (1993):

When the classroom environment in which students spend so much of their day is organized so that student-to-student interaction is encouraged, cooperation is valued, assignments and material are interdisciplinary, and students’ freedom to chase their own ideas is abundant, students are more likely to take risks and approach assignments with a

willingness to accept challenges to their current understandings. Such teacher role models and environmental conditions honor students as emergent thinkers. (p. 10)

Marlowe & Page (2005) agree, claiming that:

Since the early 1980s, there has been an avalanche of literature supporting the need for the kind of active learning experiences described, advocated, and supported by constructivism. We know that a traditional education system focusing mainly on a teacher or another student dispensing information is inadequate and inappropriate for the present and future needs of students. (p. x)

The literature on constructivism supports a shift from transmission teaching to transactional, and I believe I implemented that shift when I chose student-led approaches, including discussion, in the central activities of this unit.

Accomplishing a Constructivist Classroom with Student-Led Discussion

As former English teacher Jim Burke (2013) matter-of-factly suggests, “if done right, discussions pay great dividends for teacher and student alike” (p. 219). It would seem that most teachers agree, as “95% of English language arts teachers value[d] peer discussion in literature instruction” in a 2006 study of discussion practices (Nystrand, 2006 & Burke, 2013, p. 220). However, it is important to interrogate why such a consensus exists around this teaching strategy. In addition to supporting the shared construction of knowledge so valued in constructivism and social learning theory, there are myriad reasons far deeper than comprehension to warrant such a use of instructional time. For instance, as McCann, Johannessen, Kahn & Flanagan (2006) argue:

The relationships that we build by talking about our reading makes it possible to discuss the text of our lives: the difficult things that happen in our community, the things that bring us joy, and the things that scare us. When we make space in the classroom for students to develop, express, debate, and support their own ideas about books, we gain their trust. We make a safe space for them to talk about the text of their own lives when it is necessary. (p. 121)

This particular quotation is one that aligns with my teaching platform and choice to preserve the full-class read norm in Advanced English Seminar. There is something about framing a discussion of life's challenges within the context of literature that provides for meaningful discoveries and vulnerability. Just as some may reference a "friend's" actions when discussing something uncomfortable, so might students use fictional characters or situations to unpack uncertainties they have. In addition, it is also suggested that:

Students attain significantly higher levels of thinking when they are encouraged to develop skill in generating critical and creative questions and when they are provided opportunities for dialogue with classmates about the questions posed and conclusions derived from information they encounter. (Sheerin & Richetti, as cited in Shapiro, 2003, p. 351)

This provided a strong basis for the Discussion Leader Guide, as students were asked to do just that at least once, if not more, during our unit. According to Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz (2013), my Discussion Leader Guide is a "dialogic tool," or "an activity, heuristic, assemblage, guide, or other mechanism a teacher uses in planning and practice that helps scaffold students into talking to learn" (p. 35). They go on to say that "using dialogic tools designed to elicit student voices can significantly increase student participation and can reshape

the ways teachers conduct a class” (Juzwik, Borsheim-Black, Caughlan, & Heintz, 2013), which is encouraging to me, as those are the goals in my teaching this unit.

While benefits of discussion are generally agreed upon by English educators, a divide between philosophy and practice appears to exist when discussion is implemented, particularly in terms of soliciting genuine student voice (Nystrand 2006; Burke, 2013, p. 221). For instance, Nystrand (2006) found that “teachers asked most of the questions” and “recitation, rather than authentic discussion, [was] the common mode [of discussion] of most classrooms” studied (p. 395; as cited in Burke, 2013, p. 218). Even though “authentic, open-ended teacher questions and up-take (follow-up questions) significantly improved engagement and quality of discussion... [it was found that] student-generated questions had the strongest effect” (Burke, 2013, p. 221). It was also found that in teacher-led classrooms, “presentational speaking” was often the norm: a form of speaking in which “students merely repeat what they learned (or heard the teacher say) instead of constructing meaning through collaboration... or what might be better described as authentic conversations” (Burke, 2013, p. 217). Again, this is a phenomenon I observed in Advanced English Seminar. In this same study, “the dominant mode of teaching [was] ‘frontal,’ which describes a style in which teachers lecture and lead large-group discussions” (Burke, 2013, p. 218). This is problematic and worth considering in practice, for as Knoeller (1994) found:

Studies of classroom language suggest that the way teachers structure lessons profoundly affects not only the amount but the character of student talk. Moreover, how a teacher conducts class shapes and sometimes limits the ways students approach interpreting text. (p. 572).

Because of this concept, I analyze how students approach interpreting a text in my Data Analysis section.

Particularly concerning for student voice, too, is that “teacher-centered instruction often emphasizes textual scrutiny at the expense of personal response” (Knoeller, 1994, p. 572). As another former English teacher Jeffrey Wilhelm says so honestly in Burke (2013), “being told what to think is not empowering or interesting or fun. Nobody I know, student or adult, likes being told what to think or do” (as cited in p. 236). So, what is the alternative to teacher-led, and often limiting, forms of discussion? Knoeller (1994) and others support a student-led approach to classroom discussion, citing that “in student-led discussion, there is... the potential for students with different perspectives to interact, negotiating interpretations of the text with relatively little mediation by the teacher” (p. 573). In addition, Cone, cited in Knoeller (1994) corroborates the constructivist nature of discussion, arguing that:

Besides assisting students with understanding sophisticated text, talk can create a classroom atmosphere in which the most able reader and least able reader can collaborate in making meaning and can learn from each other by sharing their insights, experiences, questions, and interpretations... The emphasis [is] always on asking questions, looking back at the text for substantiation, trying out interpretations, coming to agreement or living with disagreement: students creating meaning together, students teaching each other. (p. 574)

It should be noted that Knoeller’s 1994 study in conjunction with teacher Cone involved “student discussion leaders... charged with raising productive questions and keeping discussions moving. Importantly, this role was not conceived in terms of imitating traditional, teacher-led

discussions, but, rather, licensed students to interact” (p. 573), much like the structure of this inquiry.

Pritchard & Woollard (2010) name this peer-to-peer modeling “cognitive apprenticeship,” and they find that when a “peer master” works with a peer, this may cause the apprentice to perceive the subject matter of higher value (p. 56). This may be because the peer has a more positive or socially engaged relationship with the fellow student than a teacher, better positioning him or her to contextualize the concept and articulate thoughts in the language of the learner (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010, p. 57). Interestingly, “during student-led discussions of literature in Cone’s class, students frequently attributed words and perspectives to others – whether authors, characters, or classmates” (Knoeller, 1994, p. 575), proving at least some awareness of the contributions of others in constructing their learning.

In an observable manner, too, student-led discussion has a potential impact on participation. In Knoeller (1994), it was found that this strategy was beneficial in that “students have the opportunity to participate more fully by talking more... Often 90% or more of students spoke during such sessions” (p. 573). Even those who did not speak very much in this particular study “clearly profited by listening to student-led discussions since [they] had internalized what others had said, especially given the degree of detail [their] writing captured...” (Knoeller, 1994, p. 579). Perhaps this suggests a more authentic way of pursuing student voice and engagement.

Finally, it would be remiss given the context in this inquiry to ignore the democratic nature of student-led discussion. Indeed, as McCann et. al (2006) note, “thinking and talking and expressing ideas is crucial for our growth as individuals, and [for] the creation of a positive, supportive, and democratic society” (p. 128). Nussbaum (1997) agrees, citing the classroom as a place to develop “Socratic” abilities and tenants of participatory citizenship:

In order to foster a democracy that is reflective and deliberative, rather than simply a marketplace of competing interest groups, a democracy that genuinely takes thought for the common good, we must produce citizens who have the Socratic capacity to reason about their beliefs. It is not good for democracy when people vote on the basis of sentiments they have absorbed... and never questioned. (p. 19)

The view of discussion as a perspective-gaining exercise for emerging citizens is certainly not new, but as is clear from a study previously cited, “some teachers might see discussion as the process of leading students down a road to find answers that the teacher already knows” (McCann et al, 2006, p. 8). High-attaining students like the students in Advanced English Seminar are keen to impress their teachers with correct answers, but this “does not encourage students to participate” (McCann et al, 2006, p. 9).

According to Aasebo (2017), “an open, pedagogical classroom climate that has curriculum focus and which includes discussion and dialogue appears to be the most effective in promoting citizenship in secondary school,” and further, that a “deliberative classroom climate has a positive effect on students” (p. 1-2). Our All-School Meetings and other school discussion structures welcomed and even encouraged deliberative discussions, and I noticed some students’ willingness to disagree in our classroom before this unit.

Limits of Student-Led Discussion

As with any teaching strategy, student-led discussions are not always effective for every learner, and the classroom context, including students’ prior experiences and ability levels, should be considered when implementing an approach so reliant on student voice. There are

some logistical considerations that must be made, for in “student-led classroom discussions, one salient problem is to maintain the flow of talk as required to both fill time and to ‘cover ground’ for the purposes of evaluation by the teacher” (Craig & Sansui, 2002, p. 115).

In addition, Pritchard & Woollard (2010) are careful to point out that “while peer masters are teaching, they are not necessarily learning” (p. 58). A teacher implementing student-led discussion is tasked with assessing the learning of “peer masters” as well as the students more easily assessed in the position of traditional learners. In addition, they mention that identifying a sufficient number of peer masters and matching them to compatible apprentice students in a given class can also be difficult. These are important caveats to consider, but in this inquiry, students were not matched on a one-to-one basis. All students were evaluated in my classroom through the Discussion Leader Guide, and I would certainly argue that they demonstrated learning!

In addition to what they demonstrated on paper, learning could be “heard” through the very nature of discussions in our class. According to Juzwik et al. (2013), “learning talk” or discussions that indicate “what learning sounds like” (p. 14) can be characterized by a variety of responses, and I sought to capture those responses in my analysis of the questions posed by our discussion leaders and their transcriptions. Learning talk can involve “speculating, imagining, hypothesizing, narrating, arguing, reasoning, justifying, explaining, instructing, asking questions, and analyzing and solving problems” within the context of a discussion of literature (p. 14-15), and these elements are evident in my data analysis.

Conclusions

I found the aforementioned literature to be incredibly empowering as I went about implementing these new strategies in my classroom. Because student-led strategies tend to appear so hands-off from a teacher perspective, I wanted to be sure to have a clear understanding of how these strategies could and should be used, as well as how I could best support students within the framework of my constructivist teaching philosophy. Even though student-led strategies may conjure images of chaos or lack of rigor for some, this literature points to the proper teacher-led scaffolding and support that must occur for these strategies to be successful. Even though I did not intervene with my Advanced English students as much as I might have with another group of students, this was a conscious choice and not lack of preparation or interest in doing so. According to the literature (and the lived experience I have had), I understand it is never appropriate for a teacher to completely relinquish all aspects of a class to students; however, it was a goal of mine to have students feel as empowered as possible, and I did not mind making them feel as if they had total control.

Chapter 3

Methods

This study was conducted in the spirit of teacher inquiry, and as such, its methodology is common to that style of research. Dana & Yendol-Hoppey (2014) explain the difference between teacher inquiry and traditional research as practitioners “focus[ing] on providing insights into teaching in an effort to make change... to become the very best teachers they can be for their students” (p. 9). Because teachers know their own classrooms best – and they have the agency to observe, collect data, and implement changes through the very act of being a teacher – teacher-inquirers are empowered to design and change the methods of study to best suit their context. The decisions I made in this study were aimed at learning from and for my students, and again, they were intended to answer the inquiry questions of:

- What happens when students are empowered to lead their own learning in an advanced, secondary English classroom?
- How can an unmediated text, student-led discussion, and multimodal assessment encourage student voice and strengthen authentic participation?

Pre-Unit Student Survey

Before the unit began, I distributed an optional online survey to all students in the class with the goal of determining their prior experiences with discussion, as well as their attitudes and concerns about discussion in Advanced English Seminar (See Appendix C). I chose to ask these

questions because I was curious about the influence of their democratic schooling experience on their attitudes about discussion, but I also wanted to see if they had similar concerns to me when it came to our own classroom discussion dynamics. I had a hunch that they did based on the body language I observed in class, but I was not sure if they would connect those concerns with the changes I was about to make to address them. In other words, did students sense that I was making this change to empower them, or to them, was this just seen as part of having a student intern teach the class?

When I present my findings in the next section, students' responses are labelled A through F, and each letter represents the same student's responses across questions for ease of comparison. The survey responses were not edited or shortened; what is presented in the next section is a few students' perspectives on discussion in their own words.

Records of Contributions to Discussion

Again, part of my motivation for pursuing this inquiry project was to address the issue of exclusive conversations occurring in Advanced English Seminar. Therefore, to draw a comparison between a traditional day of discussion and my student-led discussions, I tracked the number of each individual's contributions to our discussions.

On the day of our last discussion of *Light in August* – the novel we studied just before *The Tsar of Love and Techno* – I tracked the number of times each member of the class contributed to discussion, including my mentor teacher and me. Then, during the student-led discussions in my unit, I used the same procedure. Using a hand-drawn “map” of the classroom on that particular day (as seats were not assigned), I marked distinct contributions of each

participant with an “X” next to the participating student’s name. I did not note the duration of the contribution, nor the order in which students participated. However, if a student made a comment I wished to revisit in the audio recordings I made, as well, I marked that with the sentence stem they used for later reference. After all data was collected, I created a table to look at how the pre-unit discussion compared to contributions within my unit. This allowed me to represent changes in individuals’ participation in an organized and visual form. Then, I highlighted the individuals whose changes I found notable to discuss in my conclusion. I chose not to include this table in my findings, as it merely aided in my reflection on the unit and to more clearly get a sense of participation levels among students.

Recordings of Student-Led Discussions

While I was tracking students’ contributions by hand, I also audio-recorded the discussion. The purpose of these recordings was to provide a more detailed record of the discussions which I could reference later for key moments of student engagement and ownership of the class. Students were not asked to identify themselves before contributing to the discussion, so the focus of these recordings is more about its content than individuals’ habits. Students were aware that they were being recorded during class discussions.

Analysis of Students’ Written Preparation for Discussion

One of the perceived risks I could imagine with a student-led discussion was a drop in the depth or complexity of questions asked. Rather than telling students what types of questions they should ask when leading, though, I allowed them to write their own. Wherever I could place trust

in them, I did, and this was to embrace the “what happens when...” nature of my inquiry question.

To draw conclusions about the questions they posed, I used the class set of completed Discussion Leader Guides as data. I compiled all discussion questions prepared independently by students in a single document for ease of comparison, and then, I categorized each question based on the goal/nature of the students’ question. The categories that emerged from my classification are:

- a. *Speculating on or Predicting Action (PA)* – The student asks a question about a character’s past or future actions that cannot be answered with the text alone. An answer to this question would require “taking stock” of the character’s previous actions, considering motivations, and using those details as evidence.
- b. *Recognizing Human Nature (HN)* – The student asks a question about a character’s habits, experiences, or tendencies in the novel that the student realizes is shared by people in reality. An answer to this question would require speculation including, but not limited to, elements of psychology, personal connections, and an acceptance (or rejection) of that shared human experience.
- c. *Determining Motivations (DM)* – The student asks a question about a character’s motivation for doing an action or having a certain mindset. An answer to this question would require a certain level of empathy with that character, as well as an understanding of the character’s past experiences and influences.
- d. *Analyzing the Author’s Choices (AC)* – The student asks a question that acknowledges a purposefully-written element of the text, while at the same time, inviting speculation about its significance. An answer to this question would

require a general understanding of that element in literature (such as plot structure, motif, point of view, etc.) and an argument about its impact on the story itself.

- e. *Soliciting Personal Reactions (PR)* – The student asks how other students related or reacted to a particular scene, or, in some cases, use of language in the text. An answer to this question would be based on individual students’ emotions or experiences, but they may substantiate their feelings by elaborating on the text.
- f. *Interpreting Symbolism (IS)* – The student asks about the significance of an object, character’s action, or scene as it relates to the theme of the novel as a whole. An answer to this question would require an acknowledgement (or rejection) of that element’s significance, as well as a theme statement or concept to which it connects.

After all questions were categorized in this manner, I tallied each category to determine the prevalence of each “type” of question (see Table 4-1). I did so to see if there was a trend in the nature of questions formed by independently by students, for again, *The Tsar of Love and Techno* is an unmediated text, and students could not use online prompts or guides for assistance in their creation. I was curious to see where students wanted to take discussion and if it differed from the direction we usually took.

Overall, I found that these methods were effective for seeking possible answers to my inquiry, for they were not disruptive to normal class activities or forced upon students in an artificial way. Students submitted work as usual, and I evaluated them as I usually would. However, I realized that paying such close attention to my students’ questions and other

contributions to discussion made me a more informed, appreciative teacher, for these details often go overlooked in the tennis-match of classroom discussion dynamics. As a result of looking so closely at student work and listening so carefully to students' voices, I came to know my students in a more meaningful way than before. I realized I had a class of empathy-seekers and human-nature-critiquers, author-analysts and fortune-tellers, and this classroom data is far more impactful on me as a teacher than anything I can enter in a gradebook.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Because my inquiry questions focus broadly on “what happens when” an intervention is made, I approached my data analysis with a very open mind. I hypothesized about some findings before I began, but just as I approached our student-led discussions each day, I was more interested in what the data said to me than what I could say about the data. What I find particularly rewarding about this collection of data is how much it draws from student voice, just as this unit did in our class. Much of the data is from students’ own contributions, in their own words, and I feel presenting it as such is only appropriate for the focus of this inquiry.

Overall, I found that my students had a wide variety of experiences with and reactions to discussion, whether in the classroom or beyond. I suspected they would, but I also discovered that they had thoughtful reflections on the practice of discussion itself. In fact, some students noticed the same problematic trends in our classroom discussions as I did, and they predicted those trends might change with a change in the discussion structure.

Then, in the actual practice of our student-led discussions, my students engaged effectively with one another despite the absence of my voice; even though I sought to give students ownership of the class through having student discussion “leaders,” those students placed in relative positions of power for the day largely shared it amongst themselves and with their classmates. I believe this indicates, again, the power of discussion in fostering a classroom community, as well as the benefit of bringing students together around a common text.

When it came time for the student-generated multimodal project, I was also pleasantly surprised by the creativity our students demonstrated. What was especially satisfying was seeing previously reserved, less participatory students taking ownership and pride in the products they

created on their own. My most significant finding from this final project experience was how many possibilities students created for themselves that I would not have thought to provide otherwise; in other words, *I cannot possibly know my students as well as they know themselves*. In being empowered to design their own projects, students were able to create individualized pathways to success while demonstrating skills that may not be included in traditional forms of assessment in English class.

Pre-Unit Student Survey Responses

Reflecting on Prior Experiences

All students who responded to the pre-unit survey reported prior experience with leading discussions. I expected this to be the case because of the values of our democratic school and the structures in place to encourage student voice; in fact, some students confirmed that they participated in these specific structures (All-School Meetings, Advisory Council, “No-Teacher Time”). The following survey responses speak to students’ prior experience with discussion and their evaluation of those prior experiences as “positive” or “negative:”

“I lead discussions a lot in ASM and Advisory council, as well as other opportunities afforded in school (sic). They are usually positive, or if the content/comments of the discussion aren’t positive, I never feel that the experience was negative.” (A)

“I have lead discussion at ASM and No Teacher Times and other various meetings before (sic). I am comfortable leading most of the time and it’s a positive experience.” (B)

“I have lead several discussions during school and classes. Most of these were positive except for the deliberation I lead during a class.” (C)

“I have prior experience leading discussion by moderating ASM, which was stressful, and in smaller groups both in school (“no-teacher time” forums, which were student-led discussions) and in my extracurriculars, which have been positive experiences.” (D)

“I have lead discussions in other English classes at [Delta] before (sic). Some of the experiences were positive, but others were not. Most of the experiences I have had were in school.” (E)

“I have moderated at ASM, which is typically a positive experience. Though I’m not sure that counts as leading discussion. However, in class I generally haven’t spent much time leading discussion.” (F)

In this particular group of students, responses varied most in response to the second half of the question: whether or not they consider their experiences to be positive or negative. When responding, students used qualifiers such as “usually,” “typically,” “some,” and “most” to show that while they have had positive experiences with discussions, they have also experienced negative. One student remembers being the All-School Meeting moderator as a “stressful” experience, and another is unsure if ASM “counts as leading discussion.” I found this particular comment intriguing because it points to how isolated school activities can seem to students, even as they participate authentically in and out of the classroom. Even though they have the opportunity to engage in discussion in after school activities and in life in general, this student was unsure about a discussion “counting,” begging the question of whether students realize the value of what these opportunities provide beyond a classroom context.

In addition, another student reports a non-positive experience leading a deliberation-style discussion in another class, which I found to be interesting considering the structures I know to be in place in that class. While only a fraction of the class responded to the survey – and others

who did not respond could certainly differ in their responses – I found this initial set of student opinions to be encouraging and vital context as we adjusted our class discussion activities.

Anticipating Possibilities & Challenges of Student-Led Discussion

When asked to anticipate the possibilities and challenges of our upcoming student-led discussions, students responded with the following reactions. As initially hoped, there is evidence of student awareness of existing dynamics in Advanced English Seminar discussions before the student-led model was introduced (i.e. dominant voices, students interrupting others, concern for maintaining the “flow”). Again, their thoughtfulness around discussion was encouraging to see as I rationalized the design of this unit for my inquiry:

“I love the possibility of highlighting what I believed to be the most important aspects of the reading, as well as having a clear direction for discussion. In previous classes/readings in this class, discussion is always great, but usually doesn't have a set direction. By using the pre-made questions and having set moderators that participants look to, there's a clear control for the group, which is greatly beneficial.” (A)

“I am excited to ask questions about my own interpretations about the reading and hear other student's thoughts. I am worried that some leaders may be shut down if they don't interpret the reading the same way as some of the louder voices in our class.” (B)

“Hopefully it will be engaging and people won't be talking over everyone.” (C)

“I am excited to see what kinds of questions people come up with. I can see challenges in people actually following the discussion leaders' questions.” (D)

“I think it is a very good way to get everyone to participate, but I think it may be difficult to do that if one person takes control of the discussion.” (E)

“I'm excited to ask the questions that I'm curious about. I get excited, confused, frustrated, etc. with certain parts of every book and I'm looking forward to seeing if my

classmates had those same reactions. I think participants may be hesitant to speak up in class since discussion is being led by one of their peers, but I think that will become less of an issue as the class period goes on and people become more comfortable.” (F)

It appears that there are some common hopes for student-led discussion in this data set. For instance, some students acknowledge a desire for ownership through the sharing of their own perspectives (“highlighting what I believed,” “my own interpretations,” “ask the questions that I’m curious about), but some also looked forward to gaining the perspective of their classmates (“hear other students’ thoughts,” “see what kinds of questions people come up with”). In fact, one student goes even deeper with this latter goal, hoping to foster empathy between herself and others (“I get excited, confused, frustrated, etc. with certain parts of every book and I’m looking forward to seeing if my classmates have those same reactions”).

Still others anticipated that our student-led discussions would encourage participation and engagement (“I think it’s a very good way to get everyone to participate,” “hopefully it will be engaging”). One student predicted the strategy would establish a “clear direction for discussion... a clear control for the group,” which I find particularly interesting given the possible connotation of “student-led” being “chaotic” or “unpredictable.”

Of course, some students did share worries and challenges they anticipated having with this discussion strategy. Speaking to the very motivation for implementing this strategy, one student says “I am worried that some leaders may be shut down if they don’t interpret the reading the same way as some of the louder voices in our class.” In doing so, this student acknowledges the unequal authority and levels of participation in our usual whole-class discussions, as well as a fear that no new strategy will change this dynamic. Additionally, the

notion that a student in our class could be “shut down” for having an alternative opinion was troubling to hear, and indeed, avoiding this issue formed the basis for this inquiry.

Sharing Classroom Discussion Preferences

When students were asked to share the discussion techniques they previously enjoyed or found most effective, they responded with a variety of preferences from small-group discussion to large, and some added information about how they like a discussion to be moderated and structured:

“I actually enjoy a large, unstructured discussion when used in the correct setting. Small groups also have their place in school, though I can often find them to be too intimate to develop unique, diverse opinions. Personally, I find a large, semi-structured discussion to be best. The structure gives the discussion a certain flow, but allowing that flow to dip in directions you hadn't anticipated is not only okay, but encouraged.” (A)

“I really enjoy small group discussions. I like to discuss my thoughts and interpretations, but someones (sic) I feel a bit over powered in our class when everyone is having one large conversation. I also like asking our own questions for a quiz.” (B)

“I enjoy both small and large group. I prefer it to be structured in the way we raise hands and call on people.” (C)

“I have enjoyed less structured discussion such as typically in AES. I find that going in circles with questions to make sure everyone answers is effective and enjoyable.” (D)

“I think structured small groups tend to work best.” (E)

“I personally like large group discussion. This way everyone gets to hear everyone else's thoughts. The only challenge can be disproportionate speaking (some students talking all the time while others don't say much at all). I think this can be helped by having a structured discussion. By introducing many different topics, it's more likely that students will want / be able to speak on at least one of them.” (F)

Again, it is obvious from this data set that some students are aware of and disturbed by “disproportionate speaking” and being “over powered” in our class discussions. Most students surveyed also acknowledge the value of hearing the perspectives of others and see the role of discussion in fostering that dialogue.

Of course, these opinions only represent those students who responded to the survey, and because it was a survey about discussion, their opinions may be skewed towards favoring discussion as a classroom technique. Nevertheless, I appreciated these insights and kept them in mind as the unit unfolded.

Qualities of Discussion Leaders’ Preparation

By compiling the questions independently generated by students in their discussion preparation documents, I found some encouraging trends in the content and nature of questions students asked without a great deal of guidance. All questions were of a higher-level order, and I was impressed by the answers they sought.

For instance, even though symbolism can be a daunting literary element to unpack for some readers, this class was enthusiastic in asking most of their questions about the symbolic nature of objects and situations in this novel – of which there are a great many. Even though students were asked to answer their own questions in writing before coming to class, the act of posing a question to others implies that they are interested in comparing and perhaps even gaining the perspective of others. Closely following “Interpreting Symbolism,” the second most frequent style of questions were related to “Determining Characters’ Motivations,” which I believe indicates an interest in empathy and in drawing connections across plot points in the text.

It is intriguing that neither of these styles of questions have a “right” answer, though I have seen my students seek those black-and-white solutions in texts we have read before.

Table 4-1: Summary of Discussion Questions

Question Category	Student Example	# of Questions
Interpreting Symbolism	<i>“In the beginning of the story, the characters wind up with a lot of tools that are broken or unusable. What do you think that suggests about the story as a whole or the characters themselves?”</i>	23
Determining Characters’ Motivations	<i>“Why do you think Galina tried out for the Miss Serbia pageant?”</i>	21
Recognizing Human Nature	<i>“Why does Galina make her husband buy the painting, and what does that say about our inability to let go of the past?”</i>	6
Predicting Action	<i>“What do you think Galina’s grandmother saw on her deathbed?”</i>	4
Analyzing Author Choices	<i>“When lineage is mentioned in this chapter, why is it described by female descent only?”</i>	4
Soliciting Personal Reactions	<i>“Has your opinion of Kolya changed since reading ‘Granddaughters’? Why or why not?”</i>	2

Overall, what this set of data allowed me to see was that I could, indeed, put trust in my students to ask meaningful questions. If my unit was to be questioned by an administrator or parent, I could point to these products as evidence of rigor remaining high in Advanced English Seminar, whether or not it was me at the center of the class. Students did not formulate these questions using sentence stems or prompts, so their creation must have come from a place of genuine curiosity or, at least, prior knowledge of what creates productive discussion. Even though I had a set of essential questions from which I could interject if needed, I found that it

was not necessary to use them as students shared these questions – the ones they generated – instead.

Also, I should note that this data only accounts for the questions submitted by Discussion Leaders on their days of discussion, but they were not the only students posing questions. This student-led structure allowed all students to ask questions when they felt compelled, and though I do not have as detailed data from those contributions, I cannot recall them being of lesser quality than those posed by the leaders themselves. Because of this occurring, the whole concept of having a discussion leader (or the value of not, as I later discovered) will be explored in the Conclusion.

Pre-Unit Discussion Participation vs. Student-Led Participation

As previously stated, some students and I found the distribution of voices to be problematic in our traditional class discussions. To elaborate, during one class discussion of *Light in August* by William Faulkner, my mentor teacher and just two students contributed 39 of the 54 total contributions – that’s three individuals making up 72% of the discussion! On the other hand, discussions that were student-led yielded a more democratic distribution of voices. In my data table, I saw a significant decrease in the amount of contributions by those three individuals, and, anecdotally, I recall times at which all three of them qualified their comments with something to the nature of “I know I’ve spoken a lot today, but...” or “I just want to say, quickly...” before sharing. They appeared to be more aware of their disproportionate participation when more voices were added to the mix.

Also, I can confidently share that every student contributed at some point in this unit's discussion activities: something I could not definitively say did or did not happen in discussions before this unit. I saw this as a victory for student voice, and it was a meaningful step in our pursuit of a more democratic classroom.

Transcription of Student Reactions to the Unit

At the end of our final day of discussion, an especially insightful conversation occurred as students reflected on reading *The Tsar of Love and Techno* for Advanced English Seminar. When asked for their overall reactions to the unit (but not necessarily their opinions on the content or structure), students felt they should share the following. As I discuss in my Conclusion, what students shared exceeded my initial expectations and hopes for this unit:

“This is my favorite book that we read in this class. I don't know what genre you would put this in, but there's kind of this class of books and movies where like, this kind of overall 'meaning of life comes up,' and so I really love this book for it, and I just feel like there are so many layers to it. And my favorite quote to the book wasn't even until the second to last chapter. Um, and so, I don't know, I feel like this was a really great book to close on, **especially because we're doing our creative projects**, and all of our other books, we could get something out of them but **this one is really great to show the creative side of the classroom.**” (Student 1)

“I think this is an extremely important book and a book I'm glad we read in seminar. And I would be very happy if [the mentor teacher] taught this book in the future to future students because I think it's a book that probably will become on par with some of our other novels we read. It's very rare that you hear about 'a great novel' but this is a great novel. [pauses] Beautiful, powerful, one of those books... the meaning of life. **I think it's just as beautiful as *Gatsby*, just as beautifully written as *Jude*, and maybe not as beautifully written as *Light in August***, but nothing, I mean, beats Faulkner's style, so...” (Student 2)

“I personally, I would really like the book, but **I myself had a hard time writing reflections** or thinking about what to write for reflections **I feel like the other books we read there were so many um, I can’t think** -- I just had a hard time thinking about how to write a reflection, cuz like I could just ramble about the book but having to have that thesis and you know, proving a point or whatever, it’s uh I don’t know but I did, I did really enjoy the book.” (Student 3)

“I’m really glad you chose this book now because we have read really older, somewhat Victorianish novels, and we have really, **I think it’s just good for diversity in novels** because -- not that, not that *Jude* and *Gatsby* were the same -- but they were all older novels so they have more -- [Another student interjects “that quality”] -- yeah exactly, that theme to them -- but this is different -- it has different writing, it has different style, **it is more modern** and it uses older concepts and newer concepts and I kind of like traversing through it... [inaudible] because it has that...” (Student 4)

“I really liked this book, and I’m really appreciative of you choosing it for us, and **I really liked how you set up the class in how we are leading discussion** because like, **I got a lot more out of it that I might’ve normally and I really liked it** [class erupts in conversation]” (Student 5)

“I just wanted to say um, this doesn’t feel like a seminar book just because **it’s very contemporary**. I loved this book, I have to say that upfront. When I read the end, that was the closest I ever got to **crying over a book**, so uh, yeah, it was really good. **I thought it was something I’d read on my own time**. This is something I’d read again, and, but, yeah. My problem is that, yeah, what [Student 3] was saying, all the other books we’ve been reading have lots of cracks and crevices to look into and find other symbolism, but this really throws everything at you. Yeah.” (Student 6)

“I thought it was really, really important that we were taught a book like this because I feel like it rounded out like, the first half of seminar, bringing it to modern day, and **I don’t think in a lot of advanced English classes we read a lot of these books because it’s hard to teach them and keep them like, on the same level as these classics** but I think this is one of those perfect books for doing that and I kind of introducing how to read newer modern types of novels because like, one of the reasons I also struggle with like, finding a solid theme to write a thesis on -- but I think that was -- I’m not used to like, learning a more modern novel in this seminar way and I think it’s really important we did that and I just think this was the perfect book to do it because it was just so full of this bigger theme.” (Student 7)

I found the students' reactions revealed more than I had originally expected, for many of them report seeing differences in our class as a result of this unit that I had not anticipated. For instance, one student speaks to "the diversity of novels" that she feels the contemporary *Tsar of Love and Techno* gave our class. In a class jokingly referred to by students as Advanced English "Cemetery" in a nod to how old the texts and authors usually are, this was an encouraging student observation. However, perhaps what I found most intriguing from this group of students' comments was from Student 7: namely, the student saying that "I don't think in a lot of advanced English classes we read a lot of these books because it's hard to teach them and keep them like, on the same level as these classics." In saying this, this student is not only making an observation about the content of her classes, but also about the difficulty of *teaching* them. While Student 3 said she struggled to write about the themes of this novel, Student 7 pushed back by saying that these struggles are the result of engaging with "a more modern novel in this seminar way." Student 3's opinion is still entirely valid, and I was disappointed to hear that she struggled with her written assignments for this text, but for Student 7 to see value in that struggle – and voice it to the class – was surprisingly mature and thoughtful.

Observations from the Student-Generated, Multimodal Final Project

Students shared their final projects on the last day of our unit, and it was also my final day as an intern at "Delta." As such, it was a rather festive occasion, and we held presentations in the auditorium to give students the stage they deserved. One by one, students projected their projects at the podium, if necessary, and then students who created physical products (collages, sculpture, calligraphy, etc.) led us in a gallery walk on the stage. Though all of the students

produced excellent final products, I would like to share a few specific projects for the sake of this inquiry.

First, the “student-generated” part of this project was validated for me when one of the quietest students from our class discussions came to the podium. He had approached me a few weeks prior wanting to know if he could incorporate coding into his project, and, not really having a strong sense of what that meant – and somewhat blindly trusting his uncharacteristic enthusiasm – I had allowed him to proceed. He pulled up his project on the screen, and I was amazed. In short, this student was able to apply his knowledge of coding to making an argument about themes and motifs in the book. He developed a code that “read” the entirety of the book and identified the frequency of certain words to support his argument. He found it interesting, for instance, that a minor character’s name appeared more often than the love interest of the novel in a particular section. He shared his findings in an oral and visual report filled with graphs and tables to clearly explain his data to those of us, like me, who have never created or interpreted code. He even ran a simulation of the code for us in class, creating a wordcloud-type graphic that we could more easily interpret.

Before this unit, this student was mostly silent in our class discussions and left class as soon as possible when class time was over. His writing was strong and concise, but I sensed he had an obligatory attitude towards English. I was hesitant to approve his creative project because I didn’t understand coding very well, but if I had imposed the limits of my prior knowledge on him, he would not have had this opportunity. By completing opening the stage, literally, to students with abilities beyond my own, I gave them opportunities to showcase their individual talents beyond what is typically valued as literacy in English class. The enthusiasm and amount

of effort he dedicated to this project was inspiring, and his project alone made the student-generated final project feel like a success.

Even those students who thrived in class discussion found alternative ways to share their voice in this project. For instance, I had a highly engaged student create a harrowing short film that featured a voiceover of his favorite quotes, as well as scenes showing various symbols and settings from the book. This student shared that he scouted locations across Centre County to find those that looked most like an industrialized Russian landscape, and with recent snowfall during our unit, he found some amazing scenery to incorporate. The editing was professional quality, and it was evident that he took this project very seriously, for he chose to upload the final product to his public Vimeo page. As an aspiring filmmaker, he is able to use this product in his portfolio for college. Through this activity, I am glad he was able to authentically engage with a personal interest for academic reasons.

Then, in a wonderful exercise in fostering empathy, one of my students chose to “censor” a painting by someone else and then write about the experience in her apologia, as one of our main characters in *Tsar of Love and Techno* was a censor who struggled to reconcile his actions on a daily basis. The student shared in her presentation that she went to a local thrift store, bought a painting of a woman with her child, and painted the child out by carefully filling in the background. In addition to noting the technical skill required, she talked about feeling destructive as she did this, as if she was ruining a perfectly wonderful piece of art. This form of perspective taking required a significant amount of effort and reflection that goes far beyond discussion this action in a hypothetical sense. Again, I never would have thought to create a “censor a painting” project in my English class, but this student showed me how art – and, in a sense, acting – can be used as a vehicle for understanding the actions of characters.

These are just some of the anecdotes from this end-of-unit assignment. One student, a skilled dancer, danced a part of *Swan Lake* to mimic the action of a main character, and she reflected on the challenge of that experience. Still another created a short movie trailer for a film that brought characters together in this novel. I am confident in saying that each student not only demonstrated engagement and learning as a result of this assessment, but that they showed it *enthusiastically* and with pride in their work.

Overall, by offering student-generated final projects like this, I was able to temper the bias of my prior knowledge and values when assessing my students. Because they rationalized their creative choices to me in an apologia, I was able to see their thoughtfulness behind their creativity, and I could fairly evaluate whether or not they met the general, structural expectations I provided them (for rubric, see Appendix D).

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Reflection

When I set out to conduct a teacher inquiry project, I had the preconceived notion that I would come out on the other side with a concrete set of data, a meaningful analysis, and a significant amount of gained knowledge – clear, compact, and clinical. While some of this is still true, and I did learn a great deal about myself and my students in the process, the nature of what I learned surprised me. As I pursued concrete answers based on goals I thought were final, I began to realize that I was not searching for new understandings to know and expound upon, but rather, I was uncovering what I do *not* know. Better yet, I found that gaps in my own knowledge were where students could find their voices.

To those who know me well, I like to be a resource – the one who knows the answers, who can support, who can guide. However, in this unit, I forced myself to defer to students, and I found it has become part of my practice when I am permitted to plan lessons with my new mentors. This experience really has shaped my teaching philosophy, as I have largely minimized my outward appearance of my role in the classroom since this unit. Some teaching mentors of mine have said time and time again that the best lessons involve hours of preparation beforehand, but little interference in the actual implementation of it. While I know my unit did not appear entirely “effortless” to students – think back to that day I did not have the reading! – there were times I encountered guilt as I changed my views on what teaching “looks like.”

I admit, at times, I felt unsure when giving control of class over to these capable students. As an intern, I wondered, was I using my limited time in the classroom wisely? Was I giving students too much freedom? Was my democratic school the only place where these activities were feasible? What would this type of class look like to a visiting administrator? After all, I barely spoke! The literature supports these approaches, as constructivist strategies are “messy,” but that lack of control is something I have come to embrace as the sign of an authentically-engaged classroom. I now understand that there is no one way to teach, and the act of teaching looks different on the surface of every classroom.

With more experience since I taught this unit, I realize that it feels odd to not discuss literature with students. As much as I value supplementary lessons that provide context, I very much value returning to the text itself and unpacking the scenes, language, symbolism, and more through the eyes of my students. That is why I am glad I explored student-led discussion, but I would like to reflect on the “student-led” part of that label.

Was this class truly student-led, or was it student-empowered? At this point, I would argue more for the latter. As our discussions and other activities developed, I found that the top-down, discussion-leader-to-follower model dissipated and students just exchanged ideas naturally with one another. The leaders did not dominate, and if they had any distinction from their peers, it was to moderate discussion so as to support the sharing of their peers. Students did not speak in a presentational style, and they spoke dialogically *to one another*. If I could study this class again, I might have done a video analysis of their body language, for I do believe they were more relaxed, conversational, and focused on directing conversation towards one another. In the end, even though some students came to discussions more formally prepared than others, there were no “leaders” in the traditional sense – just a more democratic feeling. Perhaps my

assigning “leaders” and calling them such, I was not acting in a democratic manner, for I was still using my authority as a teacher to require certain students to participate in a certain way. “Next time,” I would be curious to see what would happen if all students prepared for each discussion with the Discussion Leader Guide, and then were invited to share.

Nevertheless, I do find it important that discussions were student-centered and not teacher-centered, and I hypothesize that some students felt more comfortable addressing their peers than my mentor and me – two well-read, adult individuals with sophisticated lenses for reading literature. I do feel I was slightly humbled by engaging with my students around an unmediated text, for I truly lacked a “cheat sheet” or teacher’s guide for the content. It was the closest approximation I could get to being a student in my own class.

With unlimited time, and perhaps a bit more planning on my part, I would have liked to involve the author of *The Tsar of Love and Techno* in our unit, if possible. In future, I would like to reach out to him to share the joy of teaching his book in our class, and I would love to hear his reaction to the text being formally studied by high school students. It was a rather unconventional choice to teach it, and I wonder if he ever thought it would appear in American schools. By contacting him, I could potentially ask some of the questions that nag at my students, or, perhaps, invite them to dialogue directly with him.

To conclude, I am rather surprised that the title of my honors thesis and teacher inquiry project contains the words “I Don’t Know,” but these words speak to how I have grown as an educator and a person this year. My learning is never finished, whether in the teaching profession or beyond, and the sooner I admit that to myself, the more inquiry I can do.

Packing Up, Moving On

My last day as an intern in the Delta Program was the final day of my unit. As such, it was bittersweet. Advanced English Seminar met the block before lunch, so as our presentation day came to a close, students slowly left the auditorium to head to the cafeteria. Many said goodbye, and there were some hugs and high-fives. Projects were left on tables for me to grade, and the gallery walk faded as students moved on with their day. I, on the other hand, had tables to move, posters to carry, and a desk to clear.

I began to clean up, but I could not find my copy of *The Tsar of Love and Techno* amongst my other items. Panicked, I searched my bag, and it was nowhere to be found. It had all of my notes, all of my scribbled-down reflections, and my favorite bookmark, so I had to find it! Minutes later, I reentered the auditorium to find a student – the one who had produced the short film as his project – casually sitting at the podium, reading. Reading my edition of the book.

I greeted him.

“Oh, hi, Hannah!”

I asked him how it was going and if he would be heading to lunch before the end of the block.

“Yeah... I will then. I just wanted to look at a couple things. This is your copy, right? These are your notes?”

I told him they were, and he nodded.

“Hmmm.”

He put the book down, got up to leave, and thanked me for teaching this unit. I smiled and thanked him for being so enthusiastic about it. I picked up my book, turned out the lights, and took my box of student work to my desk.

Later, I had another, very engaged student come to my desk and ask some clarifying questions about grades for the end of that semester. She had always been very conscientious, and, coincidentally, she was the student who complimented my handling of the missed reading in *Light in August*. Before she left, I asked her what she thought about *The Tsar of Love and Techno* – the reading, the class discussions, her final project.

“It was great. The thing is, though, I don’t feel like I got, you know... what YOU wanted us to know... I know you weren’t supposed to talk and all, but we didn’t really hear YOUR voice.”

“That’s the whole point!” I responded, laughing. But after she left, I paused to reflect. Perhaps there is something to be said, after all, for a teacher’s voice. Both of these students, in their own ways, sought my perspective in a unit that sought to minimize it.

Looking forward, I wonder how I can invite student voices while still valuing and sharing my own. Can I manage being a student in my own class? Where and when is it best to share my thoughts? What is it that students value in a teacher’s voice? Could grades be a factor?

These are all questions for future study, as teacher inquiry is never truly finished.

Appendix A – Unit Plan in the Understanding by Design (UBD) Model

STAGE 1 – DESIRED RESULTS

Unit Title: *The Tsar of Love and Techno*

Established Goals:

- Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences and conclusions based on an author’s explicit assumptions and beliefs about a subject. (CC.1.2.9-10.B)
- Apply appropriate strategies to analyze, interpret, and evaluate how an author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them. (CC.1.2.9-10.C)
- Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme. (CC.1.3.9-10.C)
- Determine the point of view of the text and analyze the impact the point of view has on the meaning of the text. (CC.1.3.9-10.D)
- Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it and manipulate time create an effect. (CC.1.3.9-10.E)
- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately. (CC.1.4.9-10.A)

Understandings: *Students will understand that...*

- Some societies value individualism while others value collectivism.
- One’s identity may be influenced by his/her family or society as a whole.
- Self-expression is a natural desire, but some societies restrict it more than others.
- Authority figures may alter the truth as a form of oppression.
- National events can have very serious impacts on individuals’ lives.

Essential Questions:

- How does individualism conflict with the norms of a collective society?
- How do our families’ stories and traditions shape who we are?
- How can self-expression survive in an oppressive situation?
- What role do the arts play in self-expression?
- Is it possible to rewrite history?
 - Historically, what methods have governments and individuals used to do so?
- How does Russian culture differ from American culture?
 - How might conflicts arise between them?
 - What conflicts have occurred between the countries?
- How far should/could one go to defend the truth?

Students will know:

- A simplified timeline of the Russian Revolution and its impact on modern history
- The difference between first person singular/plural and third person omniscient/limited points of view

Students will be able to:

- Analyze the effect of narrative structure on the meaning of a text
- Analyze the impact of point of view on the meaning of a text
- Analyze the use of humor/sarcasm in fiction writing
- Analyze the development of complex characters between and within texts
- Write a personal interpretation of the text’s plot and meaning

STAGE 2 – ASSESSMENT EVIDENCE

<p>Performance Tasks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer-generated reading comprehension quizzes • Preparation for/leading of discussion (Discussion Leader Guide) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 3 discussion questions/responses ○ 1 passage/explanation of its significance ○ 5 short-answer questions/answers 	<p>Other Evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in class discussion • Two 2-pg. reflections on reading • Final creative assignment
<p>Key Criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflections are to be 2 pages, double-spaced, and focused on an underlined thesis. (10 pts. each) • Discussion Leaders must complete the Discussion Leader Guide <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 3 discussion questions + 4-6 sentence response ○ 1 passage from text + 4-6 sentence response ○ 5 short-answer questions/answers • Final creative assignment + 1-2 pg. double-spaced “apologia” describing their creative choices 	

STAGE 3 – LEARNING PLAN

Summary of Learning Activities:

- Before the unit begins, students will select a day to be a Discussion Leader during the unit.
- Introduce the unit’s expectations at the beginning, including the parameters for the final creative assignment.
- Students will read assigned sections of *The Tsar of Love and Techno* outside of class.
 - Day 1: “The Leopard”
 - Day 2: “Granddaughters”
 - Day 3: “The Grozny Tourist Bureau”
 - Day 4: “A Prisoner of the Caucasus”
 - Day 5: “The Tsar of Love & Techno” & “Palace of the People”
 - Day 6: “The Wolf of White Forest”
 - Day 7: “A Temporary Exhibition” & “The End”
- Teacher will define terms, provide historical context, and answer general questions about the day’s reading at the start of class.
- Each period, two or three students will be responsible for leading discussion on the day’s reading using the Discussion Leader Guide. A copy of the Discussion Leader Guide will be submitted in hard-copy format to the teacher at the beginning of class. **Each student in the group will submit a separate document.** Discussion will be entirely student-led with some teacher intervention for logistics, when necessary.
- An oral reading comprehension quiz will be given each class period using the questions created by Discussion Leaders.
- Throughout the unit, students will complete two 2-page, double-spaced reflections outside of class on readings of their choice.
- Students will design and propose a final project that 1) engages with a theme from the novel as a whole, 2) has a creative, non-written component, 3) has a written apologia explaining choices made in the creative component

Appendix B – Discussion Leader Guide

The Tsar of Love and Techno Discussion Leader Guide

Name: _____ Reading: _____

Please submit a hard copy of this document to Hannah at the beginning of your class!

<p>Discussion Questions & Responses</p> <p>*Please write a 6-8 sentence response to each discussion question.</p> <p><i>These are questions that are open-ended, require some level of analysis or interpretation, and/or connect to possible themes in the novel.</i></p>	Question 1:
	Response 1:
	Question 2:
	Response 2:
	Question 3:
	Response 3:

<p>Passage & Significance</p>	<p>Passage:</p>
<p>*Please write 6-8 sentences on your interpretation of the passage</p> <p><i>How is this passage significant to broader themes in the novel, or how does it develop a particular character?</i></p>	<p>Significance:</p>
<p>Short-Answer “Quiz” Questions</p> <p><i>These are questions from the text that have one answer related to WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, or WHY.</i></p> <p>*Don’t forget to answer them!</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.

Appendix C – Student Survey Questions

1. What prior experience(s) do you have with leading discussions, if any? (Were these positive or negative experiences? In or out of school?)
2. Looking ahead to our student-led discussions, are there any possibilities that excite you? Do you perceive any challenges for discussion leaders or participants?
3. What discussion techniques have you enjoyed as a student in the past? Did you find certain techniques to be more effective than others (i.e. large group vs. small group, structured vs. unstructured)?
4. Have you ever heard of the book for our next unit, *The Tsar of Love and Techno* by Anthony Marra?

Appendix D – Multimodal Project Rubric

The Tsar of Love and Techno Multimodal Project Rubric (25 pts.)

CREATIVE COMPONENT:

	5 pt.	3 pt.	0 pt.
COMPLETION & PRESENTATION	The CC was complete on the presentation day.	The CC was incomplete on the presentation day.	The CC was missing on the presentation day.
CRAFTSMANSHIP	The CC was carefully and thoughtfully constructed over time; the final product is polished and presentable.	The CC was constructed thoughtfully, but some parts would benefit from additional time and care.	The CC was poorly constructed or seemingly rushed; the project as a whole would benefit from more time spent on its creation.
RELEVANCE	The CC was clearly and directly related to the novel's themes; the themes -- not the medium -- are the main focus of the project.	The CC was somewhat related to the novel's themes; however, some parts seem unrelated to the purpose of the project.	The CC is entirely unrelated to the novel's theme; the medium or topic was chosen with little regard to the novel.
CREATIVITY (*Bonus - 2 pts.)	The CC was exceptionally creative; the project went above and beyond expectations for the assignment.		

APOLOGIA:

- Explanation of the medium used (“*I made a painting because...*”) - 2 pt.
- Explanation of the choices made in the medium (“*I painted the house in green because...*”) - 2 pt.
- Explanation of connections to the theme (“*The house is symbolic of...*”) - 2 pt.
- Quality of writing (*conventions, grammar, organization, etc.*) - 4 pt.

Additional Comments:

FINAL SCORE: _____ / 25

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